[Interview No. 7]

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19723 Marble

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High up an the east hill overlooking the West Rutland marble valley, and the village of West Rutland, are streets of marble workers' homes. The worker to whom I had been referred as being well informed about workers' conditions lived in the east end of a two family house. It was painted yellow at one time, but the exterior paint had faded and chipped off and the porch and exterior in general was not in a very good state of repair. A small well-cut lawn ran in front, and shrubs and a few flowers bordered the house. As with all the homes in this district, there was no rubbish of any kind visible. It seems to be prideful of the workers to keep the property neat if not well upkept. Mr. M- met me at the door and invited me into the house, after I had explained my business and the name of his friend who had asked me to see him. [M.?] a man of about thirty-eight, Norwegian, a sturdy, active man, called in his wife, and after a few moments of general conversation, he began talking about the working conditions of the marble men. I glanced around his house. The inside was in excellent state of repair. The plaster was in good condition, wall paper aged but whole, the floors covered with a couple of rugs in the living room and a large linoleum in the kitchen. There was no central heating. In the kitchen a large coal range stood, freshly polished and cleaned. In the living room was a table model radio about six years old, a wicker settee, two occasional chairs, and a leather seated rocking chair, books, magazines, and phonograph with records. There were potted and cut flowers, pictures on the walls, and everything about the house was immaculately clean. C. 3 [?] 2 None of the furniture was new, but none was dilapidated. Mr. and Mrs. M- had no children, though on their lawn, and in the quiet street, played half a dozen clean-faced, browned,

sturdy-legged, cleanly dressed children, who smiled shyly and after a long moment said “Hello” in a hesitant but eager voice. Conversation pertinent to the matter follows:

Q. How do those workers who bought the company houses, pay for them?

A. So much is taken out of their pay each week.

Q. If a worker paid about $1400 for his house, how much would be deducted a month?

A. I think it would be about $14.00 a month.

Q. And how much if he had paid $3000?

A. It would be $30.00 a month, I believe. Though not many of them have paid as much as that - in fact, none that I know of. Do you know of any?

Q. No. $3000 was the asking price, I believe, on one house in Center Rutland, but the worker did not purchase it.

Q. What about back rent, accumulated since the strike of 1936?

A. Deducted it, I think, $1.00 a month, from pay. We were out nine months, you know, and so the rent bills that piled up amounted to a lot of money.

Q. Is this a company house?

A. Yes.

Q. Did you buy it?

A. No. They ask too much money, $2300.00. It isn't worth it, the old barn. They never fix it up. As long as I've lived here 3 they haven't repaired it. The tenants have to do all the repairing.

Q. How long have you lived here?

A. Fourteen years.

Q. How much rent do you pay?

A. Ten dollars and eighty cents a month.

Q. Do the man save any money - very many of them?

A. Quite a number had small amounts in the bank, $5.00, $15.00, but during the strike that mostly disappeared. Quite a few workers had money in the West Rutland Trust Company. That failed in 1930.

Q. The bank crash in 1933 took a lot of them. The West Rutland Trust Company failed in 1930, three years before the crash?

A. Yes. In eight years they've paid off 48% of the deposits. There probably won't be any more.

Q. What about other forms of savings - such as life insurance?

A. Many of the men have life insurance.

Q. How much do most of them have?

A. I don't know.

Q. Would it be as much as $2000.00?

A. I don't know of anybody that's got that much. Most of the man have $500.00 or $1,000.00. I've got $500.00.

Q. Is that straight life or endowment?

A. Mostly endowment. Mine is 20 year.

Q. I noticed in the newspaper reports that the men were charged for cow pasture, as a deduction from their pay. Is that true?

A. Yes, some of the man were charged that - it amounted to $10.00 a year. (In the committee investigation it was reported as $8.00 a year.) 4 Q. What about credit at the grocery store? Do most of the men pay cash at a chain store, or do most of them buy on credit at an independent grocery store?

A. Mostly they buy on credit.

Q. Are they pretty good pay?

A. They pay up every week. They have to, or no more credit.

Q. Do most of the workers own cars?

A. Yes, maybe half of them.

Q. What about radios?

A. Most of them have radios.

Q. Old ones, or new ones on credit?

A. Both. A lot of old ones, and a lot of the men buy radios and sometimes furniture on credit.

Q. What about loan companies? Do the men ever borrow money?

A. I wouldn't know about that they never mention it. So far as I know none of the men borrows money that way.

Q. Most of the women are good cooks? They do all their own cooking?

A. Yes, the men live pretty well. Most of the women are good cooks, especially mine. The Polish people eat well.

Q. Do you have a garden?

A. No, I don't, but most of the men do.

Q. Would you say half of them do?

A. Yes, I'd say over 75% of them do. Almost every house has a small garden, then the marble company gives them the use of all the land they want to raise a garden on.

Q. Why don't you have a garden - what do you think of it? 5 A. I've been telling the men for years that they should think more about getting their salaries raised than about raising a garden. It's hard work here in the mills and quarries, and you might say the men are really still working for the marble company when they are taking care of their gardens. They work hard and don't get enough money to give them the comforts of life, and try to make a little more with their gardens. The Vermont Marble Company has 27,000 acres they own in the state and it doesn't cost them anything to give the use of the land for gardens, but as I say, the men work hard at their jobs, then they go out and try to be farmers too. What are they doing but taking the living away from the farmers? The farmer spends his time raising food to sell, and when these men have gardens they are taking so much more of the market away from the farmers. I say, let the farmer do his work, and have his market and his income, and let the marble worker do his work and get enough money so he can buy his food from the farmer, the way he should. That's why I haven't got a garden. Every hour they work in their gardens, they're making up an hour that they've worked for the

marble company at insufficient wages. So in the end, if they spend two hours a day in their garden, they're spending at hard work ten hours a day, and then have barely enough to get by on.

Q. How does the pension work?

A. Well, they used to be retired from active service when they were about seventy-five. That was when the company paid the pensions. A few years ago the pension plan was set up and premiums paid about half by the company and half by the marble worker. Under this plan he could be retired at sixty-five. Many of the workers do not like 6 to have this premium deducted from their wages and so do not belong to the pension plan. The payment on retirement is based on the average wage during the past ten years. If the workers are fired or quit they can withdraw the money they have paid into the pension fund. Q. Isn't there some movement of workers out of the state?

A. Yes, some. But most of the workers who don't get jobs at the marble companies, go on the town, or get WPA jobs. Some leave if they can. A friend of mine moved to Detroit last month, took his family. He had a job in the AC Spark Company plant at Flint. He says he'll never come back here. Another fellow I know moved to Hartford last year, to work in some brass company, I think.

Q. During the strike in 1936 what was the strike pay?

A. There wasn't any regular pay. Money and food and clothes were given out as they were needed to the poorest.

Q. What is the average annual income?

A. It's hard to say because most of the men don't work every week, or every day in a week, and then they all get different rates.

Q. Would you want to say how many men belong to the union now?

A. It would be hard to say, because the union is being reorganized.

Q. How many hours are the workers putting in now, on the average?

A. The quarries are working forty hours a week, the mills are working forty hours a week, and the shops are working from twenty-four to forty hours a week.

Q. The strike was a failure in the main wasn't it? The only increase in wages was the common labor, from thirty-seven and one-half cents to forty-four or five? 7 A. No, the strike was a lot more successful than the papers said. The common laborers were getting thirty-seven and one-half cents an hour and got a raise to forty-four cents. Experienced labor was raised from forty-four cents an hour to forty-six cents an hour. A machine runner, that runs the channeling machines, from forty-seven cents an hour to fifty-one cents an hour. Jack hammer runners, that run the air drills that start the new blocks from the quarry bed, got a raise from forty-two cents an hour to forty-nine cents an hour.

Q. Then a common laborer earning forty-four cents an hour and working twenty-four hours a week gets $10.56 a week?

A. Yes. For forty hours he gets $10.56 a week.

Q. In the quarry they work twenty-four hours a day. Why is that?

A. It's the only way. They can't shut down the machinery. There are three eight-hour shifts.

Q. But only two shifts in the mills?

A. Yes, but the machinery in the mill isn't shut down. There's always somebody there working. The sand and water for the saws has to run all the time.

Q. But the shops have only one shift?

A. Yes, unless there's a rush of orders, then they add a shift, or work overtime.

Q. Did you ever work in the quarry?

A. Yes, for seven years. Now I'm in the machine shop. Tool sharpener, at the lime plant.

Q. How many shifts at the lime plant? 8 A. Three. The kilns have to go twenty-four hours a day.

Q. How do they make the lime?

A. They put the waste marble into big crushers and crush it, then it goes into the kilns where the impurities are burned out. They made a good grade of agricultural lime there.

Q. I thought the lime was quarried in the form of limestone, right near the kiln. You say it's waste marble?

A. Yes. They pull up carloads of waste marble from the shops and mills. They don't quarry lime.

Q. What about accident compensation?

A. That's paid for one-half by the company and one-half by the worker. It costs fifty cents a month. You get a minimum of $10.00 a week for thirteen weeks.

Q. What about overtime?

A. Over forty hours a week of work is paid for at one and one-half times the regular rate. That includes holidays too. Before they used to make us work on Labor Day at no increase in rate.

Q. Now if you work on Labor Day you get time and a half? Why did they used to make you work on Labor Day? Was it so the man couldn't get together?

A. Yes, and to show the men that Labor Day didn't mean a thing in this town. It still doesn't mean anything. The laboring man is just like cattle to the bosses. They used to make them work Labor Day even if they hadn't worked for a week before, or wouldn't work for a week after. Oh, they're smart, all right, all right. But we showed them during that strike.

Q. What are the gains that were made in working conditions? 9 A. We got them all, every one of them. They're all in the committee's report.

Q. Name one condition that was changed, will you?

A. Well, the lunch hour change was one. You know, these aren't quarries, really, they're mines. For thirty-nine hundred feet under this hill here the mine goes. Some nights, late, after it's quiet, and if they're pretty busy you can hear the jack hammers pounding away, right under this house. It's cold down there the year round. From the opening of the mine where it's warmest to the furthest point under this mountain here it ranges from freezing to zero, the year round. There's ice in there the year round. Men work in heavy winter woolen clothes, even in August. Well, before the strike the men went from hot ground above, into those mines into cold weather, down hundreds of steps. Then at noon, with an hour for lunch, they had to come up the steps again, and into the hot air. We wanted a cage for the derrick so they could let us down, and only half an hour for lunch, so we could just eat lunch down there and cut out the noon trip up. We got it. Now we only have to take a half hour for lunch at noon and after work come up in the cage instead of walking up.

Q. I understand the State's Attorney was friendly to the strikers? (State's Attorney in Vermont is the same as District Attorney in other states)

A. That's Bloomer. He's been having political battles with the Proctor's a long time. Yes, he worked hard for the strikers. The Proctor's hated him. During the strike the company paid

the salaries of about sixty deputy sheriffs who were supposed to protect the 10 property of the marble company from the strikers. Instead they went roaming around the streets looking for trouble. They were picked by the sheriffs of Caledonia and Windsor counties. One of these used to be on a strike-busting payroll down in Pennsylvania somewhere. The guy from Windsor is just a bastard if there ever was one. Well, anyway, one night one of the deputy sheriffs came to Bloomer and said the deputies had orders from higher up to dynamite Bloomer's house and then go out onto the street and pick up four or five of the first strikers they came across and take them to jail for the dynamiting. This sheriff who told this was a friend of Bloomer's and didn't want them to do it, so he told Bloomer about it to warn him. Bloomer got busy at once, got some more of the deputies, and got signed confessions out of them that they were instructed to blow up his house and arrest some workers. He has these confessions in his office now.

Q. I understand that the marble workers had to pay for their polishing heads and powder, before the strike. Do they now?

A. They didn't right after the strike. The company didn't like the publicity they got. They didn't charge them for it. But one of the shop workers told me last week they had started to charge them again.

Q. How much did the powder cost, do you know?

A. No, I don't know from experience. I never worked in the shops. But I heard that one of the men, with a large order on hand where he was putting in some overtime, paid out in one week $6.00 for the powder. In Barre the workers don't have to pay for any of their supplies.

Q. What deductions are made from your check now? 11 A. From mine, rent and insurance. I don't have the pension.

Q. What about water bills?

A. These are paid directly to the town, now, and has been that way since the strike.

Q. Most people who rent houses don't have to pay water - the landlord does that. Evidently things are different here. What about electricity?

A. The company turned over their house meters to the Central Vermont Public Service Company, and the employees buy their electricity from them instead of the company. That's been since the strike, too.

Q. Is there any difference between The rates you paid the marble company and those you pay the electric light company now?

A. Now, I don't think so. Our bill's been around $2.50 a month right along. You know that during the strike, when electric light bills got in arrears, the company threatened to cut off the meter. They did that to a lot of workers. I had a bill of $19.00 that was due, then they turned me off. And they charged $2.00 to turn the meter on again. That was a racket. But I went down with $21.00 and they put the electricity back again.

Q. What happened to the people who were evicted in the winter of 1936?

A. So far as I know, no one was evicted. Some were taken out of the company house and put into houses where the town paid the rent, but I think no one was turned out into the street. I had a fight with the company about that. One morning 186 of us got notices to leave the houses for unpaid rent. I got mine. I went around and found out who else had got them. As I went around they asked me 12 what to do, and I told then to stay right where they were. So we all stuck, and when the deputies came around to the house threatening us, we just laughed at them. Not one family moved out, nor did the company take any action, except in a few cases where the town overseer had got houses paid for by the town.

Q. You were going to tell me about the polisher head?

A. Oh yes. Before the strike they were charging the men for the polishing heads. They were supposed to sell them at cost. I think one of the men was paying $17.00 or thereabouts for his head. We looked up the price in a dealers' catalog and found the price for this head, to the company, was about $8.00. The company was making a profit on them.

Q. You say the company owns plants in Colorado, Montana, and Alaska?

A. They own quarries there. Also in Texas.

Q. What about this appropriation the state made for the salaries of deputy sheriffs?

A. The state paid for the salaries of about thirty and the marble company paid the salaries of between fifty-five and sixty. Mortimer Proctor was at the time the representative from the town of Proctor, and he was also on the committee that awarded an extra appropriation to the Attorney General's department for the expenses of the deputy sheriffs at the strike. I think they made a deficiency appropriation of around $35,000 to pay these salaries.

Q. What do the boys do for a time?

A. In the winter they have a lot of fun at the pavilion in the Town Hall. Saturday nights the Polish workers get an orchestra up 13 from their members and they have Polish polkas. Of course they play a few waltzes and modern dances, but most of them are polkas, and they're a real hog-wrastle if there ever was one.

Q. And cards?

A. Yes, there's a pinochle game going somewhere most of the time. A lot of us get together at somebody's house, and have a game, with a little beer. It isn't store beer, either. The boys make a home brew - buy their own malt and hops, same as we used to

before prohibition. Some of them can make a good beer, and some of them experiment around trying to get a kick in it - hah!!

Q. You think the Proctor's aren't the worst offenders here?

A. The brains of the company is old Partridge. He's a sly one that old devil. He's over eighty years old, and a smart one. But he's too smart for himself. We caught onto him soon enough.

Q. How old was that plant in the Hollow that they're dismantling?

A. It's an old plant. It hasn't been used for about eight years.

Q. They say that the reason for so many small checks during the strike was that the company was trying to keep all its men employed a part of the time rather than throw them out altogether. What do you think of that?

A. That makes it bad for all of us. What we tried to do during the strike was go through the lists of workers and find out those who could be laid off, then get these men jobs an the WPA till business picked up again. But the WPA here is rotten with politics, so a few of us went to Washington and after a couple of days of fooling around 14 they told us there were already agencies to take care of situations like ours, and that's all the satisfaction we ever got out of them. Later we wrote the President, and Hopkins, and Aubrey Williams, but that didn't do any good either. What they should have done was give all the men jobs on WPA that couldn't be used in the plants, and let those left earn a decent check.

Q. It seems, from the way you describe this man Partridge, that he's still got the old notions they had back in 1900 when the American Federation of Labor was organizing the Chicago stockyards. Big business then fought the AFL the way they're fighting the CIO now, while the AFL now is on fairly good terms with big business. Do you remember

any mass movement of the workers in this town during the strike that could be called dangerous to life or property?

A. No. The time we took over Proctor we showed them our strength, though. It was Thanksgiving, and mighty little Thanksgiving for some of us. Some of the men and women wanted to go out to Proctor while the Proctor's were enjoying their big dinner, and show them how little their workers had to be thankful for. I tried to discourage them, but when I found they were determined to go, I went along, with a lot of my friends, to keep them from getting tough. So hundreds of us landed into Proctor. The sheriffs and deputies tried to stop us, and we got the bunch of them and locked them up and took the town over. Then we paraded all afternoon through the streets. The next day the company unloaded a gang of deputies into Proctor and from then on nobody could stand on the corner, or collect in even twos or threes, without being busted up.

Q. With all the struggle for existence among the workers, the 15 children look brown and clean and healthy.

A. Ah! And they're tough little ones, too. You should have seen them during the strike, right in with the fathers and mothers fighting for their rights, and fighting hard too. They're hard little fellows, these kids.

Q. In case of discharge what does the term seigniority mean?

A. That the man with the longest years of service with the company will be hired back first. That's another concession we got.